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2 Sex and modernity

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A Sociology of Sex & Sexuality

Modernity is associated with the 'industrializing process', characterized by urbanization, population increases, secularization and the rapid development of a highly complex division of labour (Kumar 1978). These processes were at least as revolutionary in their effects as the development of technology which both drove and accompanied industrialization. They had a profound influence on the spatial and social geographic organization of the citizens of urban environments, disrupting traditional frameworks for self and social meaning and creating in their place more appropriate matrices for the integration of self and society. Commentators of modernity illustrate the ambivalence about the dual processes of loss and creation and their human consequences. On the one hand, modernity can be seen as

An age of the breath-taking pace of development, of the multiplication of material wealth, of the ever-increasing mastery of humankind over its natural environment, of the universal emancipation from all, real or imaginary, restrictions which constrained and hampered human creative potential for an interminably long part of history.

(Bauman 1987: 112)

Yet the extent and pace of this development had a cost which somehow devalued and disempowered humankind: 'Reason's coming of age... subjects human life to the impersonal logic of rationalised anonymous administration systems - historical processes in short, which tend to make human life mechanised, unfree and meaningless' (Wellmer 1985: 43). This human cost is usually conceptualized in terms of the fleeting, impersonal and objectified relations between individuals or groups, a pure form of alienation, which is rightly located, in the final instance, in the social relations of production. Yet for such changes to be accomplished in an historically short time span, changes had to be wrought in more than the mechanics of production or the location of populations. For a revolution to achieve its goals, it must bind hearts and minds as well as physical bodies to its cause.

Max Weber (1974) was clear about this in his study of the connections between religious beliefs and the spirit of capitalism. As Weber illustrated, the spirit of capitalism referred to a way of thinking about economic activity

that combined the mechanics of rational action with the structuring of ways of thinking, of ordering and giving precedence to certain priorities of human existence. For Weber, and others since, a singular feature of the spirit of capitalism was ascetism – the conscious denial of pleasure. But there was a form to this denial that was distinctive – it was a worldly ascetism. This distinction meant that the denial of pleasure was not absolute in the sense one might associate with a monastic existence. The denial took place not outside, but within a world increasingly suffused with rationality. Thus the 'denial' frequently took the form of reordering of aspects of human behaviour rather than outright prohibition. The reordering entailed, first, the restructuring of parameters that defined, for example, profligacy. What constituted profligacy in the Calvinist context was very different from a similar judgement in the context of, for example, the Court of the Sun King. Second, reordering involved the reshaping of motives against an authority whose claim to legitimacy lay not in its location in tradition but in its expertise and detachment from any subjective interest. The motives promoted involved the primacy of externally defined purpose and outcome over internally experienced satisfaction. And what might, *pace* Weber, be termed the 'spirit of modernity', exerted an influence that went beyond material existence. The shaping of parameters and motives also impacted on emotions and affective aspects of human existence.

2.1 Norbert Elias and the civilizing process

One of the many brilliant observations of Elias's study [*The History of Manners*] was the idea that the successful culmination of the process consists of the historical episode of suppression being forgotten, pseudo-rational legitimization being supplied for newly introduced patterns and the whole historical form of life being 'naturalised'.

(Bauman 1987: 114)

Elias begins his *History of Manners*, first published in 1939, with a lengthy exploration of the cultural and historical meanings of 'civilization', which he views as both an expression and symbol of social formation and unity. The dynamic of the historical process was the concept of *civilité*, the basis for the ordering of social behaviour, which first became evident in the second quarter of the sixteenth century. He makes extensive use of Erasmus's (1530) *De civilitate morum puerilium* to illustrate the distinctions between *civilité* and the former patterning of social behaviour that are associated with a knightly feudal warrior nobility, encapsulated in the concept of *courtoisie*. The importance of this detailed background is, first, that it indicates and emphasizes that forms of social regulations on behaviour have a long history, and that observation and regulation of behaviour cannot be related to modernity. Second, Elias's account in its entirety represents a prolonged argument for the necessity of locating regulation of behaviour, and affective behaviour in particular, within specific historical and social structures. Finally, rather than approaching civilization as a single entity, Elias's work emphasizes the necessity to view it as a process:

The civilisation which we are accustomed to regard as a possession that comes to us apparently ready made, without asking how we actually came to possess it, is a process or part of a process in which we ourselves are involved. Every particular characteristic that we attribute to it – machinery, scientific discovery, form of state or whatever else – bear witness to a particular structure of human relations, to a particular social structure and to corresponding forms of behaviour.

(Elias 1982: 59)

Given this emphasis, then, the differences between and changes in forms of social regulation should not be interpreted in a 'before and after' dichotomy implicit in the notion that 'now we are civilized, but then they were not'. The relationship between forms of regulation of behaviour and the social structures in which they are embedded and which they reflect, keeps firmly in focus the notion of civilization as a reflexive process. At the same time, Elias makes clear the shift involved in the emergence of *civilité*, a concept which he associates closely with the dawn of the Modern Age, and which, over succeeding centuries, provided a 'measuring stick' for the emergence and ascendance of the bourgeoisie over the feudal aristocracy.

The shift in the hierarchical ordering of social power is, for Elias, indicated by changes in the ways in which people relate to one another – literally see one another:

The new stage of courtesy and its representation, summed up in the concept of *civilité* is very bound up in this way of seeing . . . in order to be really courteous by the standards of *civilité* one is to some extent obliged to observe, to look about oneself and to pay attention to people and their motives. In this, too, a new relationship of men to men, a new form of social integration is announced.

(Elias 1982: 78)

This observation of oneself and others, which is evident from the mid-sixteenth century onwards, is related, Elias argues, to the project of moulding oneself and others. It is also related, he implies, to the structural changes associated with the dawn of the Modern Age – the increasing and specific forms of interdependence engendered by the expanding division of labour in society in specific Durkheimian terms: 'The old social ties are, if not broken, extensively loosened and are in the process of transformation. Individuals of different origin are thrown together. The social circulation of ascending and descending groups and individuals speeds up' (*ibid.*, p. 79).

Interdependence and the increasingly evident unprecedented distinctions between individuals was reflexively related to this notion of observation of self and others, as new and more dynamic forms of sociation emerged. The emphasis on 'behaviour', no longer enshrined in the unwritten assumptions of tradition and fixed hierarchies, now took the form of more detailed monitoring of visible minutiae. This new conceptualization of behaviour can be read as one index of the emergence of the notion of the 'social individual' as we understand and experience it in the Modern Age. To put it perhaps too baldly, the centrality of the individual as the pivot and legitimation for

social regulation supplants that of tradition. 'The coercion exerted by people on one another increases, the demand for "good behaviour" is raised more emphatically' (ibid., p. 79). By the mid-seventeenth century, the pace and urgency of this process lessened as a new social hierarchy asserted itself. Yet there was an escalation of the regulatory content of the rules and their effects, which arguably reflected the increased density of social relations associated with the industrializing process. 'Not abruptly, but very gradually, the code of behaviour becomes stricter and the degree of consideration expected by others becomes greater' (ibid., p. 80). In the less differentiated, more stable hierarchical society, the yardstick of acceptable behaviour was the degree to which it transgressed the boundaries of one's place in the ordered hierarchy. By the seventeenth century, there was a shift in emphasis regarding such behaviour, which heightened concerns about giving offence to others. This became the central normative script for the new treatises on social behaviour, and one which operated both as a more subtle and more effective form of control:

It is immediately apparent that this polite, extremely gentle and comparatively considerate way of correcting is, particularly when exercised by a social superior, much more compelling as a means for social control, much more effective in inculcating lasting habits than mockery, or any outward threats of physical violence.

(Elias 1982: 82)

These treatises on manners, though not new in themselves, were new both in their content and their effect. Yet, the notion of civilization as a process is underlined by Elias, who illustrates how forms of behaviour considered proper in the sixteenth century were the source of shame and embarrassment two centuries later. Feelings of shame and embarrassment – affective responses – figure prominently in Elias's account. One root source of such feelings is, he argues, the increasing awareness of selves in relation to others, in the context of the fragmentation of the old fixed hierarchical order. The increasing awareness of our fellow human beings produces, reflexively, an increased awareness of self. This arises from and feeds the sense of others' observation of us – one's visibility – the conscious awareness of which heightens the social and personal significance of our actions. This significance was, from the mid-sixteenth century onwards, increasingly represented in the form of publicly articulated advice and correction.

A further significance of enshrining new forms of social integration in manners in the more detailed manifestations discussed above, is the emphasis placed on the need to distinguish 'human' from 'bestial' tendencies. Elias uses changes in the social mores surrounding meat-eating to exemplify this: Before the onset of the civilizing process it was considered acceptable, even pleasurable, to carve meat from the full carcass of the animal in the presence of the diners. However, 'In the course of the civilising process, [people] seek to suppress in themselves every characteristic they feel to be "animal", [and] likewise they suppress such characteristics in their food' (ibid., p. 120).

Accordingly, Elias charts a gradual process by which the carcasses of cooked animals were first served skinned and dismembered, then served cut

up in sections, before being carved out of sight of the diners. Such detail suggests a wider social significance for this disassociation from bestial tendencies – the concern to distance wider aspects of human behaviour from other drives and instincts that might likewise indicate an unacceptable affinity with nature. 'Behind the change in eating techniques between the Middle Ages and Modern times appears the same process that emerged in other incarnations of this kind: a change in the structure of drives and emotions' (ibid., p. 127).

Thus the same acts became associated with different feelings and emotions, in particular an increase in taboos regarding acts symbolic of these. The taboos, Elias argues, expressed themselves increasingly over the centuries, in feelings of shame, disgust, distaste or displeasure. Such affective responses were engendered by and shared between individuals *qua* themselves and others, in the form of what might be termed a 'moral universe of manners'. The ways in which these taboos were communicated changed over time but were related, as their genesis was, to changes in the structure of society. Thus, there was a decline in public pronouncements of these rituals and taboos, which over the succeeding centuries came to be communicated and inculcated at a more individual and private level – specifically, Elias says, from elders to children in the home – while there was a continuance of the moral and normative education of inferiors by superiors in the public arena.

Later it becomes more and more an inner automatism, the imprint of society on the inner self, the super-ego . . . the social standard to which the individual was first made to conform by external constraint is finally produced more or less smoothly within him, through a self-constraint which may operate even against his conscious wishes.

(Elias 1982: 129)

These insights from Elias, drawn from examples of public manners and behaviours, are germane to an exploration of the relationship between the characteristics of modernity and those of sexuality. Of particular significance is his emphasis on the historicity of feelings of shame and embarrassment, particularly in relation to bodily functions, both of excretion and those related to sexual behaviour.

Before the influence of *civilité*, special levels of shame and embarrassment were not accorded to bodily functions. They were, to a degree, proscribed, but tended to be so in relation not to what was being done but in whose presence. Thus certain activities witnessed by social equals or superiors were more proscribed than the same activities in the presence of social inferiors: 'there were people before whom one is ashamed and others before whom one is not' (ibid., p. 138). Before the mid-sixteenth century, Elias argues, the social mores did not distinguish between the functions of eating, excretion and sexual behaviour. None was seen more reprehensible nor more in need of regulation than any other.

Neither the functions themselves, nor speaking about them or associations with them are so intimate and private, so invested with feelings

of shame and embarrassment as they later become... The different standards of Erasmus's time becomes clear if one reads how commonplace it is to meet someone "*qui urinam reddit aut alvum exonerat*" (urinating or defecating)'.
(Elias 1982: 135)

Shifts in conceptualization of intimacy and of the relationship between shame and privacy are vividly illustrated by Elias in relation to the desocialization of the bedroom and of nakedness. There would be little disagreement that in the contemporary Western context, the bedroom is an 'inner sanctum' of intimacy, to which we would tend only to admit those from whom we have the least 'secrets'. Yet Elias illustrates to us how in medieval Europe the bedroom was as public a sphere as our kitchens are today. People would share the same bedroom and bed with little distinction made on grounds of sex and age. Only in the seventeenth century did the idea of dressing for bed arise. Before this it was considered unusual to sleep clothed; covering the body was considered shameful, as it indicated the possible presence of deformity. Sharing one's bed with strangers was likewise not considered extraordinary or unacceptable. Similarly, appearing in the public street naked is today an arrestable offence of public disorder, yet Elias presents the following cameo of medieval community life:

'How often', says the observer, 'the father wearing nothing but his breeches, with his naked wife and children, runs through the street from his house to the baths... how often have I seen girls of ten, twelve, fourteen, sixteen and eighteen years, naked except for a short smock, often torn... running from their houses at midday to the baths. How many completely naked boys of ten, twelve, fourteen and sixteen run beside them'.

(quoted in Elias 1982: 164)

As with sleeping arrangements and nakedness, sexual behaviour was not considered to be especially intimate in the modern sense, nor was it the source of heightened embarrassment and shame it would later become in bourgeois society, in which 'the exclusion of such functions as sleeping, undressing and dressing was enforced with special severity, the mere mention of them being blocked by relatively heavy prohibitions' (ibid., p. 165). Sex was a part of social life, and again using the works of Erasmus, Elias illustrates how sexual behaviour was not distinguished from other expressions of sociality. Children were to be equipped with the appropriate behavioural norms associated with sexual matters in the same way as they were taught appropriate behaviour in other spheres. There was no notion of the need to conceal such areas from children, nor of any sense of embarrassment addressing the idea of adult sexuality. Until the late sixteenth century, 'in keeping with the different state of restraint of feelings produced in the individual by the structure of inter-personal relations, the idea of strictly concealing these drives in secrecy and intimacy was largely alien to the adults themselves' (ibid., p. 175). Accompanying couples to the marital bed and celebration of the consummation were customs that persisted well into the

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seventeenth century. As with other human practices associated with intimacy, sexual activity was not just moved 'behind the scenes' in the later stages of the civilizing process, but arguably was accorded *the* special place in the internal ordering of affective and emotional life in the course of the civilizing process, so that by the nineteenth century, 'The relations between the sexes are isolated, placed behind the walls in consciousness. An aura of embarrassment, the expression of a socio-genetic fear, surrounds this sphere of life' (ibid., p. 180).

There is a further dimension to the civilizing process, which again is related to the specific changes associated with modernity. In the early stages of *civilité*, prescriptions relating to social behaviour were directed towards the members of the higher echelons of society. It was considered neither necessary nor appropriate, given the rigidity of the social hierarchy, to direct the behaviour of the 'lower orders'. With the increase at both the functional and the perceptual level of the interdependence associated with the division of labour, concern about social behaviour shifted both in its focus and in its mode of expression. Specifically, it produced a recognition of the full existence of those not only of equal and superior rank, but those of 'inferior' rank as well. Thus behaviour once seen as a social offence, in that it transgressed expectations of behaviour in specific social circumstances, came to be seen as a 'general offence'. Likewise, shame that was once contingent on social status now became more universal. With this universalization another shift occurred, reflecting the gradual separation of spheres that accompanied the advanced forms of the division of labour and the related elevation of the notion of individual rights and responsibilities.

With the changes in social structure, and the increased sense of visibility of selves and others outlined above, particular forms of behaviour most closely associated with instincts and impulses came into sharper focus, and were accorded distinctive status in sensitivity and sensibility. 'In keeping with its different interdependence, bourgeois society applies stronger restrictions on certain impulses' (ibid., p. 152).

In keeping with the changes in social structures and the separation of spheres, the regulation of behaviour now associated with shame and embarrassment took place, increasingly, behind the closed doors of the domestic sphere, and the direction of expressions of bodily impulses became the focus of social education, in particular that of children by their parents. This shift in the domain of regulation had, Elias suggests, profound consequences:

Precisely because the social command not to show oneself exposed or performing natural functions now operates with regard to everyone and is imprinted in this form on the child, it seems to the adult a command of his own inner self and takes on the form of a more or less automatic self-restraint.

(Elias 1982: 139)

This focus on the child as a social *tabula rasa* – the 'uncivilized' nascent adult – gave rise to a widening gap in the perception of differences between adults and children, as well as providing the background against which an ever-widening agenda of behaviours came under scrutiny. 'The children have, in

the space of a few years to attain the level of shame and revulsion that has developed over many centuries' (ibid., p. 140).

Nietzsche (1990: 53) said that 'Shame exists wherever there exists a mystery', a maxim which suggests a starting point for a further exploration of the by now taken-for-granted association of shame with bodily intimacy. Following Elias and Durkheim, Giddens (1972: 115) noted the emergence of internal impersonal constraints on certain aspects of behaviour associated with increasingly differentiated and interdependent social relations. Yet while in the process of modernity there is an organic interdependence which binds us together, there is also an increased affective gulf that is contained within, and operates through, a sphere of the secret self, in which certain feelings and acts are considered not appropriate for exposure in the public domain. In his essay on 'Secrecy', Simmel (in Wolff 1950: 330ff.) suggests that one of the markers of 'the social' in modernity is the shift between secrecy and openness. Aspects of social behaviour that were once open are now secret, and forms of behaviour or social processes once assumed to be instinctive and pre-programmed are now deemed to be open to conscious manipulation. He argues that the dimension of secrecy, whatever it encompasses, is essential to all forms of social interaction, but particularly modern forms. For Simmel, secrecy, whether in relation to feelings, acts or things, is logistically difficult in less differentiated societies because of physical proximity, but is also less significant sociologically. With increasing differentiation and forms of interdependence characteristic of modern society, there was an expansion of the internal space within which differences were created and maintained, and with this shift an expansion as well as a change in the content of 'secrets'.

It seems as if, with growing cultural expediency, general affairs become even more public, and individual affairs even more secret... Politics, administration and jurisdiction thus have lost their secrecy and inaccessibility in the same measure in which the individual has gained the possibility of even more complete withdrawal, and in the same measure in which modern life has developed in the midst of urban crowdedness, a technique for making and keeping private matters secret, such as earlier could be attained only by means of spatial isolation.

(Simmel, in Wolff 1950: 336-7)

Elias's work provides insights into the mechanics of the process of civilization and the ways in which it shaped responses to, and feelings about, the social deployment of the body and its functions, particularly in the demarcation of intimate spheres. The growing distinction between the private and public domains and the emergence of the notion of 'the individual' resulted in the decline of the passive direction of social mores. These are replaced in the civilizing process, with a more focused and nuanced regulation of affective behaviour. Intimate acts and feelings – those which in the context of modernity increasingly define identity – are most likely to be associated with shame and embarrassment. Furthermore, feelings of shame reflexively operate as internal constraints that are both the consequence and the protectors of these 'secret spheres'. The internality of these mechanisms and their consequences contribute over time to their being seen not as external

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constraints, but naturally ordained patterns. Yet their focus lays emphasis on, and consequently imbues with anxiety, behaviour which is the source of sensual pleasure.

Society is gradually beginning to suppress the positive pleasure component in certain functions more and more strongly by the arousal of anxiety; or, more exactly, it is rendering this pleasure 'private' and 'secret' ... while fostering the negatively charged affects – displeasure, revulsion, distaste as the only feelings customary in society.

(Elias 1982: 142)

2.2 Civilization and the repression of sexual desire

Published a decade before Elias's work, Freud's (1929/1961) essay 'Civilisation and its Discontents', similarly dealt with the impact of civilization on the shaping of feelings and behaviour, but in ways which reflected the more pessimistic overtones of earlier commentators on modernity. As Bauman (1987: 113) suggests, Freud:

... depicts modernity as a time when the 'reality principle' attained domination over the 'pleasure principle', and when people, as a result, trade part of their freedom (and happiness) for a degree of security, grounded in a hygienically safe, clean and peaceful environment. The trade off may be profitable, but it comes about as a product of the suppression of the 'natural' drives and the imposition of patterns of behaviour which ill fit human predispositions and offer only oblique outlets for instincts and passions.

Freud's pessimism about civilization echoes that of Max Weber in relation to 'disenchantment'. While acknowledging 'the whole sum of the achievements and the regulations which distinguish our lives from those of our animal ancestors and which serve two purposes – namely to protect men against nature and adjust their mutual relations' (Freud 1961: 89), these achievements are bought at a cost – 'what we call our civilisation is largely responsible for our misery' (ibid., p. 86). The negative consequences for humanity are, in this essay, the inhibitions on expressions of love and the continuing process of containment of sexual desire.

Love is one of the foundations of civilization, being the original driving force behind any social intercourse with others (ibid., p. 117). Yet, there is a complication in this pre-modern state, which parallels that of the pre-rational importance of mysticism in the integration of human society. Freud was suggesting that there is a psychic danger in this simple romanticism. On the one hand, sexual love offers a source of pleasure with the widest and deepest dimension for humanity. Yet there is a 'worm in the bud' of this promise. The possibility of these exquisite pleasures is muted and haunted by a fear of the loss of the object of love and the font of pleasure. The possibility of this loss increases with the complexity and differentiation of social formations associated with the civilizing process. The perception of,

and response to, this circumstance is to inhibit expressions of love and commitment to one individual, while at the same time extending the affective sphere to encompass an ever-widening circle of fellow humans. Freud calls this strategy 'aim-inhibited love', which in its immediate application represents friendship, and in a wider one encourages affective attachments to community, national identity and humanity in general. The basic human need of love, which lies at the heart of civilization, thus produces what for Freud is the most important characteristic of civilization – the regulation of social relationships, in which the needs of the individual are partially subsumed under the needs of the community. 'The liberty of the individual is no gift of civilisation. It was greater before there was any civilisation, though then, it was true, it was for the most part of no value, since the individual was scarcely in the position to defend it' (ibid., p. 95).

Genital love and 'aim-inhibited love' – friendship and its wider social and cultural expression – are distinguished in the context of civilization. Genital love provides the foundation for new families, and friendships promote cultural development because they escape the exclusivity of the former. But while the relationship between love and civilization is initially defined by its positive consequences for humanity, the avoidance of fear of loss and the regulation of social relationships, civilization progressively, disrupts this harmony. The expansion of social formations that increase the extent and quality of cultural life, broadly conceptualized, comes into conflict with the scope of expressions of erotic love.

Thus there is, for Freud, an irreconcilable tension between civilization and sexual pleasure, a tension which is characterized and shaped by three constraining parameters: the sexual expression of love between parents and children, the denial of children's sexuality and the curbing of the erotic object choice of the mature adult. In his 1912 essay, 'On the universal tendency to debasement in the sphere of love', Freud (1986: 45ff.) sees 'psychical impotence' in both men and women (though, unsurprisingly presenting in different forms) as a 'universal affliction' of civilization. This psychical impotency is, in simple terms, the inability of both men and women to experience sexual pleasure fully. The causes of this are integrally associated not just with the more diffuse temporal category of 'civilization', but specifically with the characteristics of Western culture. Cultural norms intervene in the capacity of men to experience sexual pleasure: they cannot develop full potency except with, as Freud puts it, 'a debased object' – a woman with whom he will be comfortable introducing the 'perverse components' necessary for complete sexual pleasure. Choosing a mistress or even a wife from 'the lower classes' is, for Freud, the 'consequence of the need for a debased sexual object, to whom, psychologically, the possibility of complete sexual satisfaction is linked' (ibid., p. 254). Similarly, women's 'psychical impotence' is the consequence of, first, as with men, the incest taboo and suppression of infantile sexuality and, second, the imposition of virginity and sexual passivity in maturity. This notion of 'debasement' associated with sexual pleasure is not, as might be interpreted, solely an indication of Freud's misogyny. While phrases such as 'debased object' are undeniably offensive, and arguably dangerously so since they resonate with wider misogynist

prejudices, it is worth bearing in mind that Freud was giving a scientist's account of ways of thinking which prevailed in relation to sexual pleasure which he had observed first hand and from secondary sources, either historical or anthropological.

The conceptualization of sex as degrading, defiling and polluting was, Freud argued, derived from the incest taboo and the prohibition of extra-familial expressions of sexual desire which applied to both men and women. The ongoing sense of dissatisfaction and craving for stimulation which, for Freud, inevitably accompanies civilized sex and which is frequently the cause of sexual neuroses, likewise lies in the frustration of the original sex aim, the parent, for whom all subsequent sexual experiences are a poor substitute. Sexual desires in Freud's view are, and remain, animal desires – support for this contention lies in the anatomical placing of the genitals *inter urinam et faeces*. 'The genitals themselves have not taken part in the development of the human body in the direction of beauty: they have remained animal, and thus love, too, has remained in essence just as animal as it ever was' (*ibid.*, p. 259).

If the logic of civilization is to release humanity from the despotism of nature and enable a degree of self-monitored autonomy, then a distance has to be maintained between humanity and animality. Thus civilization cannot do otherwise than curtail expressions of sexual pleasure. The evident persistence of sexual dissatisfaction – epitomized in 'psychical impotency' – supports the presence of the suppressed components of human sexuality, those which provide the (forbidden) routes to full sexual pleasure.

Yet there is a redeeming consequence of this repression, for the energies and creativeness that would otherwise be employed in experiencing the full gamut of human sexuality are, Freud says, deflected into the 'noblest cultural achievements' (*ibid.*, p. 259). There is thus a symbiotic relationship between the suppression of sexuality and civilization: one is not possible without the other. As civilization progresses, 'The tendency on the part of civilization to restrict sexual life is no less clear than its other tendency to expand cultural life' (Freud 1961: 103–104).

The original denial of incestual desire, of youthful sexuality and of 'animality', the prohibitions which enabled civilization, became embedded in cultural frameworks and expressed in value judgements. In the Western cultural trajectory, sexual pleasure was increasingly associated negatively with animality, while chastity became a desirable quality, particularly in women. The ascendance of patriarchal dominance expressed itself sexually in a narrowing heterosexual matrix of active male and passive female sexuality. The 'animal' pleasures of sex, frustrated by the constraints of the civilizing process, become subordinated to the advantages of ascetic sexuality, characterized by sexual continence, monogamy and rational sex:

Heterosexual genital love, which has remained exempt from outlawry is itself restricted by further limitations, in the shape of insistence on legitimacy and monogamy. Present day civilisation makes it plain that it will only permit sexual relationships on the basis of a solitary, indissoluble bond between one man and one woman, and that it does not

like sexuality as a source of pleasure in its own right and is only prepared to tolerate it because there is so far no substitute for it as a means of propagating the human race.

(Freud 1961: 105)

The acculturation of sex, associated with the repressive influence of civilization, becomes the dynamic for a process whose continued presence is ensured by its being the source of psychic security. What began as a process of releasing human potential has become an embedded system of denial of the promise of sexual diversity and of universalizing prohibitions on expressions of sexual desire. Freud's account of the negative effects of civilization on expressions of human sexual desire thus bears a striking resemblance to Weber's account of rationality.

2.3 Sex and rationality

In his account of rationalization and its association with occidental capitalism, Weber emphasized the ambiguity of its effects. For Weber, a defining quality of humanity is the ability to make choices between a number of possible routes to a given end. Freedom is in this sense synonymous with rationality, in that:

To act as a free person therefore means to act purposively... The deliberate calculation of the opportunities for and consequences of purposively orientated action, conditioned by means available in each case, manifests at the same time both the rationality and the freedom of that action.

(Weber, quoted in Lowith 1982: 45-6)

But the freedom which is realized in this activity is at the same time compromised. 'The "freer" the actor's decision... the more motivation itself, *ceteris paribus*, falls remorselessly within the category of "means" and "ends"' (ibid., pp. 44-45). The choices do not take place in an ideological vacuum. For the promotion of rationality itself was an ideological endeavour that reflected the principles of Puritan discipline. Thus the choices of means could not simply be defined in terms of the ends. Choices of means were made in a context that valued certain choices over others in their own right, as well as prioritizing certain characteristics of the end. For Weber, as Sayer points out, ascetic discipline entailed 'elimination from everyday life of what is not godlike', and 'the primary ungodlike factors were actually the average *habitus* of the human body and the everyday world' as well as 'the spontaneous enjoyment of life and all it had to offer' (Weber, quoted in Sayer 1991: 123). The measure of success of rationality is the extent to which its terms of reference and logic has permeated all aspects of social life. As the demystification associated with modernity progressively undermines old certainties, humankind increasingly seeks a replacement for the old ordering framework, one which gives some order and meaning to actions. The new framework which provides this psychic security is rationality. Thus, looked

at historically, as each dimension of social life is subjected to one form or another of intellectual bookkeeping, and 'old' ideas are challenged and discarded, another natural home for rational action is created. Rationalization breeds more rationality.

This is the 'iron cage' so familiar in relation to Weber's analysis of bureaucracy. Yet, as Derek Sayer points out, a cage is the antithesis of freedom. The original meaning of the 'iron cage' was the 'house of steel', a translation which for Sayer has a more persuasive message. For one can escape from a house of steel, but there is a safety in inhabiting it which offers a tempting security, one which, as Weber noted, becomes increasingly difficult to escape from:

It is as if knowingly and deliberately, we actually wanted to become men who require 'order', and nothing but order, who grow nervous and cowardly if this falters for a moment and who become helpless if they are uprooted from their exclusive adaption to this order.

(Weber, quoted in Lowith 1982: 55)

The inescapability of rationality lies in its creation of a dependency. As Sayer suggests, a metaphorical translation of *ein stahlhartes Gerhause* is 'the shell (also *Gerhause*) on a snail's back: a burden perhaps, but something impossible to live without' (Sayer 1991: 144). This interpretation emphasizes the importance of the subjective in Weber's analysis of social action: we are not automaton but actively engage in our own 'imprisonment'.

On the one hand, rationalization in its subjective understanding offered unprecedented release from magical, unpredictable and even despotic mechanisms for the direction of social action. On the other, the mechanism which defined rationality and through which a sense of individual autonomy was achieved contributed to a progressive loss of that autonomy. Thus, the means are subverted from their original purpose (service to humankind and their needs): humans themselves become servants, the ideas the masters. This, for Weber, is the paradox of modernity and the source of the pessimism he equates with disenchantment. The real tragedy of civilization was that the process that crafted 'freedom' simultaneously contributed to its mutation.

In accounts of the ambiguity of modernity, the impact of ways of thinking about sex and sexuality received little attention. Yet given the central dynamic of both the worldly ascetism and the spirit of modernity, sexuality was a prime candidate for attention. In a world which increasingly valued containment of feelings and desires, however worthy, the potential disorderliness of sex and sexuality, as the least mediated outlet of emotions and feelings, became the source of unprecedented anxieties. These anxieties were not reflected in outright prohibition of sex. They were, though, through the twinned processes of shaping of motives and sculpting of boundaries of meaning, to reorder ways of thinking about sex, what is prioritized and what is marginalized, in a corresponding modernist sexual orthodoxy.

In a brief address paid to the problem which the essential irrationality of the erotic posed for worldly ascetism, Weber listed the contexts in which erotic impulses were contained within purposive frameworks of reproductive marital alliance, and in doing so implicitly acknowledged that modernity

had put in place frameworks for rationalizing the 'irrational'. The 'rationalizing process', which arguably civilization constituted for Weber, entailed the routinization of sexual desires, which primarily required the sublimation of 'the ineradicable connection of animality' with sexual life. For in the erotic relation, 'the lover realises himself to be . . . freed from the cold skeletal hands of rational orders, just as completely as from the banality of everyday routine' (Weber quoted in Gerth and Mills 1970: 347-8).

The denial of the erotic in the promotion of sexual ascetism is paramount in this process, since erotic desires are the 'powerful deadly enemy . . . a constant deadly sophisticated revenge of animality' (ibid., p. 348). But the erotic is a constant temptation, since it represents 'the gate into the most irrational and therefore the real kernel of life' (Sayer 1991: 125). The mechanics of rationalization – the purposively ordered motivations for social action subjectively experienced – require the promotion of marriage for the personal and emotional advantages it offers in the context of fragmented traditional orders. The routinization of sexual pleasure is advanced in the marital state, and 'given to man to live according to the rational purposes laid down for it, to procreate and rear children and to mutually further one another in the state of grace' (Gerth and Mills 1970: 349). In exchange for the 'primal naturalist and *un*-sublimated sexuality' that characterized pre-modern life, one is offered the emotional security and predictability of routinized sexual pleasures. The Christian and – particularly in relation to rationalized sex – the Puritan sexual ideology promoted the positive outcomes of this exchange, offering a source of psychic security in a world where traditional certainties had been dissolved, while promoting the promise of individual autonomy in the ordering of social action.

The discussion of the mechanisms of rationality – the ordering of social action in relation to means and ends, and the loss of freedom that this inevitably entails – illuminates the shaping of sexual desires and of what constitutes sexuality in the context of modernity. The discussion also provides insights into the role of subjectivity in this process. For freedom of choice – the positive promise of rational action – implies the active participation of the individual actor. Yet the framework within which choices are increasingly made operate to shape social meanings and contain individual autonomy through an internalized value system. The original logic for the routinization of sex – inner-worldly ascetism – has become redundant, but its effectiveness remains evident in restricted and aim-directed sexual desire, which stripped of its original context is experienced as 'natural'. The primacy of genital heterosexual sex is the 'snail's shell', which offers protection from the alternative, the unnerving promise of erotic diversity.

Conclusion

In the optimistic interpretation, modernity entailed the triumph of reason over superstition, and the developing human capacity for reasoned behaviour represented the advances offered by rational action for individual freedom of expression. Why, then, was it the case that sexuality in the apotheosis

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of the age of reason suffered from the imposition of constraints, the closing down of possibilities for erotic self-expression? This chapter began by suggesting that in addition to the parameters of modernity more usually addressed – technological progress, spatial and social reorganization of populations and the triumph of reason over superstition – there was an additional element less often recognized, the shaping and directing of moral sensibility. The suppression of the irrational which was the corollary of modernity led to a renewed focus on the disruptive potential of sensual pleasure. Elias's history of manners traces the process by which social shame and embarrassment were engendered in the civilizing process, and why these feelings came to be particularly associated with bodily functions. More pertinently, he suggests ways in which, paradoxically, modernity conferred upon sex qualities which imbued it with enduring fascination. Fearful and mysterious, sequestered in privacy and increasing prudery, its ordinariness made special, it was increased rather than reduced in mysticism. Elias's work illuminates a dimension of modernity that is rarely discussed and that has a particular saliency for many of our taken-for-granted ideas about sex, intimacy and shame. They are also suggestive of the persistence and reworking of pre-modern ideas discussed in the previous chapter – the continued presence of heterosexual reproductive sex and the specialness of sex, now expressed through heightened feelings of shame.

Freud's two essays provide a striking account of the disenchantment of sexual desire, encapsulated in the notion of 'psychical impotence'. He clearly implicates the process of civilization in the denial of the potential of sexual diversity, which is the inherent characteristic of humanity. For Freud, civilization restricts the choice of the end-point of sexual desire to 'the opposite sex, and most extra-genital satisfactions are forbidden as perversions . . . that there shall be a single kind of sexual life for everyone disregards the dissimilarities, whether innate or acquired, in the sexual constitution of humans' (Freud 1961: 104).

In the work of both authors there is an argument that civilization restricts sensual pleasures. The review of Weber's argument about rationality and the rationalizing process suggests the mechanisms which lie behind this central theme of repression. For the ascendancy of rational action to be effected, the erotic kernel of life had to be marginalized and rewritten in a script of sexual ascetism, which transformed the irrationality of polymorphous sexual desire into routinized sexual practice. The rationalization of desire and of disruptive potential of 'the greatest irrational force of life: sexual love' (Gerth and Mills 1970: 343), was to be achieved through the routinization of sexual desire. The discussion of the chapter overall provides a backdrop to an understanding of the making of a modernist sexuality, in which the parameters of normal and perverse, of healthy and pathological, established 'civilized sex' as heterosexual coitus.